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ABSTRACT

"Freedom's Journal," the first newspaper published by blacks in the United States, originated in 1827 and lasted for two years. This article examines the form and content of the journal and considers some of the previous research on it. The article states that the journal contained the first report of a lynching that was published in the United States, ran campaigns to purchase and free slaves from sympathetic owners, held meetings with its subscribers to discuss their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the content, ran editorials on colonization, printed land offers for the formations of black communities, ran notices of births, deaths, marriages, and social events in the black community, and sold advertising space. The article states that the journal had between 800 and 1,000 subscribers and, using the 1850 census literacy rates, concludes that the majority of the readers were black. (MAI)

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"WE WISH TO PLEAD OUR OWN CAUSE"

* * *

FREEDOM'S JOURNAL

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE BLACK PRESS

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INTRODUCTION

On March 16, 1827, the first issue of a new weekly newspaper called Freedom's Journal was published in New York City.

This paper, the first ever published by Blacks in the United States, had a front page article entitled "To Our Patrons." In it the editors (the Rev. Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm) announced:

> "We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the publick been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us dearly,..."

The primary purpose of this article is to examine briefly, the causes and consequences, form and content of the Journal, which lasted two years.

Several other aspects of the publication, including some of the previous "scholarship" on the Journal, will also be examined in the process.

BACKGROUND

1827!

John Quincy Adams, elected in 1824, was in the last year of his first and only term of office and the shadow of Andrew Jackson was already on the land. The Erie Canal, which opened November 4, 1824, was ushering in an important phase in New York's commercial history.

1827!

New York University, which opened its doors in 1831, was still in the planning phase but Columbia University (founded in 1754 as Kings College) was celebrating its 73rd year.

1827!

The Demark Vessey slave revolt (1822) had probably passed out of the memory of most people--Black and white--and Nat Turner's better known uprising was still four years away (1831).

March 1827, could have been a time of preparation for a great celebration by Blacks in New York State. Slavery in the state (in law if not in fact) was about to end on July 4, 1827,1/ as a result of a law passed on March 31, 1817, which in turn replaced one passed in 1797. The law, however, did not immediately end slavery for all persons. Smith indicates that only persons over 40 were to be freed on July 4, 1827. This may have been true of the 1797 law but the 1817 one was more liberal.2/ As a result of this law, the number of slaves in New York State dropped from 10,088 in the 1820 census to 75 in the 1830 census.3/

Smith also states that as a result of the 1797 law, "for some time it had been illegal to transport slaves out of the state,"4/ This, however, did not stop white slave-owners from doing so. Smith chronicles the details of one such case involving the son of Isabella Baumfree (later known as Sojourner Truth) who was sold by his owner to the wife of an Alabama plantation owner.5/

1/ Bryan, page 10.

2/ Smith, page 64. The 1817 law was complicated. A Freedom's Journal report indicated that all slaves born between July 4, 1799 and March 31, 1817, "shall become free, the males at 28, and females at 25 years old, and all slaves born after the 31st of March, 1817, shall be free at 21 years old, and also all slaves born before the 4th day of July, 1799, shall be free on the 4th day of July, 1827," See Freedom's Journal, Vol. 1 (April 27, 1827) page 26.

3/ U.S. Bureau of the Census, page 57.

4/ Smith, page 64.

5/ Smith, page 64 (with the help of an attorney, Ms. Baumfree was able to get her son back from Alabama)

In addition:

(1) As Dann points out,6/ "the state was still a happy hunting ground for kidnappers" as a result of the 1793 Fugitive Slave Law.

(2) Slavery was still legal just across the Hudson in New Jersey which had 200 slaveholding families and 236 slaves as late as 1850 and still reported 18 slaves in the 1860 census.7/

(3) The American Colonization Society, organized in December, 1816, "was supported by some abolitionists and most proslavery men,"8/ and was actively promoting its program.

(4) As DuBois points out, free Blacks in the early history of the South and North had the right to vote. This right was gradually being restricted or withdrawn in virtually every state in the union. While the concept of universal suffrage had been established in New York State in 1824, there was a "For white males only" sign on it. Black males, who had voted in New York in the eighteenth century, according to DuBois,9/ then were disfranchised, were "permitted to vote with a discriminatory property qualification of $250."

With reference to the journalistic environment, there were, according to Chase and Sanborn,10/ 843 newspapers being published in 1828, 161 of which were in New York State. The vast majority of the 843 were weeklies, supported in large part by political parties, with circulations averaging 1,000 per week.

Benjamin H. Day's New York Sun (the first successful penny daily) didn't begin until 1833. The Herald of James Gordon Bennett appeared in 1835 followed by Horace Greenley's Tribune in 1841 and Henry J. Raymond's Times in 1851.

The friendly voice of the abolitionist press was not to get its start until William Lloyd Garrison started the Liberator in Boston in 1830--three years later.

6/ Dann, page 15.

7/ U.S. Bureau of the Census, page 56-57.

8/ Dann, page 15.

9/ DuBois, page 8.

10/ Chase and Sanborn, pages 106-107.

In addition, according to Detweiler11/, a local paper published in New York City was making "The vilest attacks on the Afro-American."

Thus, far from being a time for rejoicing, March, 1827, probably was a time of great concern and some dispair for free Blacks who decided that if their views of slavery and of people-of-color were to be heard they would have to do it themselves. And so they did under the leadership of the Rev. Samuel Cornish, pastor of the African Presbyterian Church in New York City, and John Russwurm, born in Jamaica and one of the first Blacks to graduate from college (Bowdoin College, Maine).

FORMAT AND FINANCES

Freedom's Journal originally had a four-page, four-column format. Its one column headlines, typical of the papers of its day, had captions such as "To Our Patrons," Memoirs of Paul Cuffee," "Common Schools in New York," "The Effects of Slavery," etc. This make-up was changed with the start of Volume 2 (April 4, 1828) to a three-column make-up with eight pages. There were, obviously no pictures in the paper, but drawings started to appear in the September 21, 1827, issue (Vol. 1, No. 28).

The paper was supported by its circulation and by advertising. I could find no mention in the paper itself of the size of its circulation. Gross 12/, however, indicates that its successor, Rights of All, had 800 subscribers and Freedom's Journal circulation should have been equal to or greater than that number which would have made its circulation close to average for the weeklies of its time. The paper cost $3 a year "payable yearly in advance."

With reference to circulation, the first issue of the paper listed 14 agents from Portland, Maine, to Washington, D.C., including a Mr. David Walker of Boston (more about him later). These people were business agents who helped sell the publication. Some of them also wrote articles (letters actually) that were printed in the Journal and they may well have been sent in other material for publication.

The first issue also contained what looks like an ad for the "B. F. Hughes' School of Colored Children of Both Sexes," (subjects taught were "reading, writing, arithmetic, English grammar, geography, history" at a cost of "$2-$4 per quarter").

The second issue listed an agent in Port-Au-Prince, Haiti and had four ads--including one for Boots at $6.00 and a land-for-sale ad by Samuel Cornish. Issue number six listed ad prices for the first time, they were:

(1) 50 cents for the first insertion of an ad of 12 lines and under.

(2) 25 cents for every repetition of the above (or "of do" as they stated in the Journal).

11/ Detweiler, page 56.

12/ Gross, page 250. This is probably the most extensive and scholarly review of Freedom's Journal available.

(3) 75 cents for the first insertion of an ad of over 12 lines but not exceeding 22.

(4) 38 cents "for each repetition of do."

(5) "Proportional prices for advertisements which exceed 22 lines."

On may 4, 1827 (Vol. 1, No. 8) they listed on page 32 a "15 percent deduction for those persons who advertised by the year; 12 for 6 mos.; and 6 for 3 mos."

CONTENT OF THE PAPER

In the first issue of the paper, Russwurm and Cornish ran a front page article entitled "To Our Patrons," in which they announced:

> "We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the publick been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us early...It shall ever be our duty to vindicate our brethren, when oppressed, and to lay the case before the publick. We shall also urge upon our brethren (who are qualified by the laws of the different states) the expediency of using their elective franchise, and of making an independent use of the same...Useful knowledge of every kind, and every thing that relates to Africa, shall find a ready admission into our columns; and as the vast continent becomes daily more known, we trust that many things will come to light, proving that the natives of it are neither so ignorant nor stupid as they have generally been supposed to be... From the press and the pulpit we have suffered much by being incorrected represented. Men, whom we equally love and admire have not hesitated to represent us disadvantageously, without becoming personally acquainted with the true state of things, nor discerning between virtue and vice among us..."

They started making good on their promises in the very first issue which contained news from Haiti and Sierra Leone, and such other items as the first installment of "Memoirs of Captain Paul Cuffee" (a Black Bostonian who owned a trading ship staffed by free Blacks), a 16 stanza poem on "The African Chief" (by Bryan), and the previously mentioned ad for the "B.F. Hughes' School of Colored Children of Both Sexes." Later issues had articles on Toussaint L'Ouverture, the liberator of Haiti, on Phillis Wheatly, the poet, and articles on and by Bishop Richard Allen.

The paper took issue with the local press time after time. For example, in a May 11, 1827, issue (Vol. 1, No. 9) the paper took issue with the

editor of the New York Evening Post who praised slavery and concluded that free Blacks ("people of colour") were better off as slaves "when they had a good master and mistress to provide for them," than they are in their "present precarious condition of emancipation and dependence." In the August 17, 1827, issue (Vol. 1, No. 24), "Mordecai" attacked the editor of the New York Enquirer, whom he said stands "foremost on the list" of those "whose object it is to keep alive the prejudice of the whites against the coloured community of this city " (New York).

The paper also constantly took issue with the reasons given by many advocates of colonization. For example, an article published on March 30, 1827 (Vol. 1 No. 3), tore into a sermon preached in Newark, New Jersey,on behalf of the American Colonization Society in which the speaker stated that three-fourths of all free Blacks "are proverbially idle, ignorant and depraved and, therefore, should be sent back to Africa." The article points out that there was only "one coloured pauper (in New York City) to every 185 (colored residents) and one white pauper to every 115,"leaving the advantage vastly to our side." He felt the same was true for moral character and ventured to say that "the coloured man's offence, three times out of four, grows out of circumstances of his condition, while the white man's, most generally is premeditated and vicious."

The Journal contained (according to Aptheker13/) the first report of a lynching published in the U.S.; ran campaigns to purchase and free slaves from sympathetic owners; held meetings with its subscribers to discuss their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the content of the paper; ran editorials on colonization and others on "self-interest" (in which it took "persons of colour" to task for betraying Black runaways and in which it urged such runaways not to trust even their most intimate friends on a subject "in which they are so deeply interested"); printed land offers for the formation of Black communities; and ran notices of births, deaths marriages and social events in the Black community.

The paper foundered on the issue of colonization. Initially both Russwurm and Cornish were opposed to sending free Blacks back to Africa and their editorials reflected this. Russwurm became sole editor officially in September,1827, but he did not announce any change in his views until sixteen months later (February 14, 1829).

Until December,1828, all editorials on colonization were negative although favorable views of the matter were published in the paper. In January, 1829, news items entitled "Expedition to Liberia" began to appear. A month later (February 4, 1829) Russwurm announced a change in his views. He said he no longer was opposed, that he now was "a decided supporter of the American Colonization Society." He, however, acknowledged that "a majority of our readers" were not so inclined and expanded on his views on the topic--in an obvious effort to change their minds--in three subsequent issues (February 21, 1829, page 370; March 7, 1829, page 386; and March 14, 1829, page 394).

13/ Aptheker, page 86.

On March 28, 1829, Russwurm announced that he was no longer going to be editor of the paper, "the time having arrived, when our connection with the Journal is about to be dissolved...," and that Rev. Cornish was assuming the editorship. This is the last issue on the microfilm reel 14/ and, according to Dann 15/, the publication ceased with that issue but resumed publication two months later with a new editor (Samuel Cornish) and a new name (Rights of All) on May 29, 1829. Rights of All probably did not last a year. Pride indicates that the last extant issue was published on October 9, 1829.16/

ON SAMUEL CORNISH AND DAVID WALKER

Several scholars have printed what I consider to be erroneous statements about the involvement of Samuel Cornish and David Walker with Freedom's Journal.

Bryan 17/ indicates that the Journal opposed colonization only during the first six months of its publication and says that "Russwurm and Cornish disagreed over this issue, with the results that on September 27, 1827, Cornish resigned to return to his Presbyterian ministry, leaving Russwurm with full responsibility, and the Journal's position on colonization was reversed."

Wolseley makes the same error. 18/ He says:

> "The two men disagreed over the question of colonizing blacks, Cornish opposing and Russwurm favoring. As a result, six months after they had launched Freedom's Journal Cornish resigned, and Russwurm ran it alone."

As indicated earlier, Russwurm didn't announce his change of views until February, 1829, considerably after the change in editorial leadership, and the paper continued to publish anti-colonization material until February, 1829. What happened in September, 1827, was the following. On September 14, 1827, an article signed by Samuel Cornish appeared in which Rev. Cornish, the senior editor, announced that "our connections in the 'Journal' is this day dissolved, and the right and perogative exclusively vested in the Junior Editor, J. B. Russwurm." Rev. Cornish praised Mr. Russwurm and gave "health and interest" as his reasons for resigning.

14/ Bryan in a footnote gives March 21, 1828, as the date for the last issue on the microfilm and states that is the date "when the name was changed to Rights of All." This is, obviously, a typographical error.

15/ Dann, page 13.

16/ Pride,

17/ Bryan, page 9.

18/ Wolseley, page 18.

This announcement was immediately followed by the following "Notice":

> "As Mr. Cornish will be traveling through different parts of the country he has agreed to accept of a General Agency for the 'Journal,' and is hereby Authorized to Transact any business relating to it."

This notice was repeated in the next issue (No. 28 dated September 2, 1827).

In the succeeding issue (No. 29 dated September 28, 1827) the Rev. Samuel E. Cornish was listed as "General Agent" above the list of 23 "Authorized Agents." This listing remained throughout the life of the newspaper, which also frequently ran notices of weddings he performed and ads by him for the sale or purchase of land.

In addition, it does not appear to me that Cornish and Russwurm were in any argument over the merits of colonization at the time Cornish resigned from the editorship. In that issue (September 14, 1827) Russwurm did start printing articles supporting colonization (many by a white Philadelphian, John H. Kennedy, originally identified only by his initials) along with others in opposition. He did so, he said, "to see the subject fully discussed" even though he opposed the Society. Had Russwurm publically changed his mind at that time, it would, I feel, have been Russwurm who would have resigned--not Cornish.

Thus, while Cornish did relinquish his position as senior editor, in my opinion it was due more to his belief that his activities better suited him for the business side of the paper. He apparently did a pretty fair job of lining up additional agents. Twenty-three were on board when he became the "General Agent" in September. The last issue on the reel (dated March 28, 1829) lists 37 agents...including one in Maryland, two in the District of Columbia, two in Virginia, one in Louisiana, one in upper Canada and two in England.

David Walker, as indicated earlier, was the Boston agent of the paper. More importantly he was the author of an "Appeal" urging that slaves rise up and fight for their own freedom.

There are several mentions of this early Black hero in Freedom's Journal in addition to his weekly listing as an agent. The first issue gives information on a meeting "of the People of Colour of the City of Boston" held at his house which resulted in a resolution supporting the Journal and pledging "to use our utmost exertions to increase its patronage." On April 25, 1828 (Vol. 2, No. 5), Walker was mentioned as one of the speakers in a meeting in Boston (that took place on March 16, 1828). The meeting was called to discuss "whether the Freedom's Journal had been conducted in a manner satisfactory to the subscribers and to the coloured community at large." On October 3, 1828 (Vol. 2, No. 27) he is mentioned in connection with his giving money to a fund "for the purchase of George M. Horton of North Carolina," an on-going project of the paper. On December 19, 1828 (Vol. 2, No. 90), the paper published an "Address, delivered before the General Colored Association at Boston by David Walker."

This address stressed the need for unity of colored people throughout the U.S. and urged the formation of a general body "to protect, and assist each other to the utmost of our power." It did not, however, call for a slave revolt and was not a synopsis of his "Appeal," which according to Wiltse 19/, was not published until September, 1829. In the earlier 1828 work, Walker praised whites who were working for the elimination of slavery but urged Blacks to unite for their own salvation.

Bryan says Russwurm printed David Walker's "Appeal" in 1828.20/ If he did, he didn't do it in Freedom's Journal since there is no record on the microfilm of such a printing. Dann 21/ says the "Appeal" was published by Cornish in Rights of All. I have been unable to obtain any copies of that publication so I have no way of checking this possibility.

Walker, born free in 1785, in North Carolina, settled in Boston in the 1820s, died mysteriously on June 28, 1830. He was a great figure in the fight for justice for Black people; he was connected with the paper but the Journal probably did not publish his "Appeal."

THE READERSHIP OF THE PAPER

Wolseley 22/ calls Freedom's Journal a "little paper" that"must have been aimed mainly at white readers, since the literacy rate of blacks in the early part of the nineteenth century was low."

Murphy echoes this last comment when she states that the chief audience of the Journal "was white, since only a small percentage of blacks could read."23/ The paper was little by today's standards but not by the standards of its own day as we have pointed out earlier in this article.

My rationale for doubting that the readership was primarily white takes a bit more explaining.

First of all, free Blacks, North and South but particularly in the North, were anxious to obtain an education and to learn how to read and write. Freedom's Journal itself published a number of articles on the subject.

19/ Wiltse, page vii.

20/ Bryan, page 9.

21/ Dann, page 17.

22/ Wolseley, page 18.

23/ Murphy, page 79.

In one article (Vol. 2, No. 25, dated September 12, 1828), it announced the opening of a new school in New York City by the Manumission Society in which they stated that it was their desire "that every child of color should learn to read and write at least." The article also indicates that there were "2,500 coloured school-age children" at that time and deplored the fact that only 600 of them were attending any school (thus the need for the new school). Unfortunately the earliest statistics on literacy are included in the 1850 census (some 23 years after the founding of the Journal). By that time there were 128,998 free Blacks (10 or older) who were able to "write in some language" (the government's definition of "literacy"). This represented 59.8 percent of all free Blacks counted in the census. 71,047 (or 67.1%) of the 105,891 free Blacks in the North were classified as "literate." Even if the percent had been considerably lower in 1827 than it was in 1850, there still should have been enough to support the paper's circulation of 800-1,000 subscribers.

Apetheker 24/ says that 1700 of the 2300 persons who subscribed to Garrison's Liberator as late as 1834 were Black and that the Liberator probably would not have survived without Black patronage. Surely if 1700 could subscribe to the Liberator, half that number could have purchased--and read--Freedom's Journal.

The above, coupled with the fact that the paper held meetings to discuss, as previously noted, "whether the Freedom's Journal had been conducted in a manner satisfactory to the subscribers and to the coloured community at large," makes me feel that Wolseley and Murphy are mistaken in their views.

CONCLUSION

Freedom's Journal gave Blacks a voice of their own and an opportunity not only to answer the attacks printed in the white press but to run articles on Black accomplishments, marriages, deaths, etc. that the white press of its day ignored.

Slavery is no longer here but the vestiges are and today's reporters and publishers--Black and white--could do well to study the Journal, adopt its objectives and emulate its content. We still need to "plead our own causes," and will need to do so for sometime to come.

24/ Aptheker, pages 108-109.

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